

scholarlypartnershipsedu

Volume 2

Issue 2 Fall 2007

Article 6

11-1-2010

Scholar-Practitioner Dialogue: Implementing Student-Centered, Authentic Professional Learning Communities in Urban Schools

Stella C. Batagiannis

IPFW

Ingrid E. Laidroo

Fort Wayne Community Schools

Follow this and additional works at: <http://opus.ipfw.edu/spe>



Part of the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#), and the [Urban Education Commons](#)

Opus Citation

Batagiannis, Stella C. and Laidroo, Ingrid E. (2007) "Scholar-Practitioner Dialogue: Implementing Student-Centered, Authentic Professional Learning Communities in Urban Schools," *scholarlypartnershipsedu*: Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <http://opus.ipfw.edu/spe/vol2/iss2/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Opus: Research & Creativity at IPFW. It has been accepted for inclusion in scholarlypartnershipsedu by an authorized administrator of Opus: Research & Creativity at IPFW. For more information, please contact admin@lib.ipfw.edu.

Scholar-Practitioner Dialogue: Implementing Student-Centered, Authentic Professional Learning Communities in Urban Schools

**Stella C. Batagiannis, *Indiana University–Purdue University Fort Wayne*,
& Ingrid E. Laidroo, *Fort Wayne Community Schools***

Abstract

The characteristics of student-centered, authentic professional learning communities in urban schools were addressed in this project within the scholar-practitioner frame. Dialogue and reflexivity were used as the methodological tools. We explored the paradigm shift that has led to the student-centered school and compared authentic professional learning communities to those that do little more than profess to have attained that level.

We explored three themes in our dialogues: 1) student-centered schools, 2) authentic professional learning communities, and 3) urban schools. As scholar-practitioners, we gained insight into the scholar-practitioner model and reflexive dialogue, which hold promise for partnerships between students and teachers; teachers and teachers; teachers and educational leaders; and P–12 public schools and higher education. In this paper, the merit of the scholar-practitioner model and of reflexive dialogue rests in its potential for a transformative vision of student-centered, authentic professional learning communities. In addition, embedded in the scholar-practitioner frame are powerful hope and transformative potential for individual educators and for educational reform.

Introduction

We began our initial journey together as scholar-practitioners, soon realizing, as is typical in qualitative research, that we did not know exactly where the path would lead us — and ultimately being deeply affected by what we learned from the process. We decided to use the scholar-practitioner model that we had selected as our theoretical frame to analyze through dialogue and reflection student-centered, authentic professional learning communities in urban school settings. The professional learning community concept is

currently popular in P-12 educational settings, including in our local schools. We wished to determine the value of the concept, and specifically, to identify the traits of a student-centered, authentic professional learning community, one with depth and promise for school reform in urban settings. We share backgrounds in urban education as well as a current interest in the work of the large, local urban district that employs one of the authors and is affiliated with the university that employs the second author.

Professional learning communities have been thoroughly analyzed and strongly promoted for years by Sergiovanni (1994, 1996, 2006), who has viewed schools as communities, entities clearly distinguishable from business and all other organizational models. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2004), strong proponents of professional learning communities, remind educators that “The challenge of building a PLC [Professional Learning Community] goes far beyond the adoption of a program. A flurry of improvement initiatives will be for naught if those within the school fail to pay attention to shaping the culture” (p. 172). There is indeed the risk of turning this innovation into merely one of the latest fads in education. Embedded in every school improvement idea, including that of the professional learning community, lies the possibility of powerful, visionary school reform or of a reduction to the trappings of fads and “buzz” words. The determining factor rests on whether educators possess vision and weave professional learning communities into their broader vision.

We framed our study, developing a student-centered, authentic professional learning community in an urban setting, on the scholar-practitioner model, which is based on “an alternative epistemology of practice that views scholarly inquiry as inseparable from practice, and...is inclusive of practitioners who provide leadership, both formal and informal” (Jenlink & Horn, 2002, p. 3). Jenlink and Horn dismiss “...old dualisms that have polarized education...such as either researcher or practitioner, learning as either theoretical or practical, or teaching versus leading” (p. 3). They suggest instead “a need to blur the historical boundaries that have fostered such dualism, and seek to create a forum in which scholars, practitioners, researchers, methodologists, and policy makers may engage in new discourses...” (Jenlink & Horn, p. 3). Jenlink (2003–2004) and Horn (2003) also link the scholar-practitioner model to the furthering of social justice in schools.

The scholar-practitioner frame is founded on a commitment to mutuality and learning, necessary traits for student-centered, authentic professional learning communities in urban schools. Neither of us was concerned with keeping the worlds of the university and of practice separate; we did not wish to continue the traditional isolationism of each. In the scholar-practitioner model, the university/school positions, teacher/student roles, principal/teacher positions, and theory/practice are dissolved. Each participant seeks to better understand the other in order for the mutual goal of learning to occur. Jenlink (2003–2004) comments that “the scholar-practitioner...[fosters] a sense

Scholar-Practitioner Dialogue: Authentic Community

of becoming, both in her or himself, as well as in others with whom s/he interacts” (p. 5). In the professional learning community the same holds true. The principal and teachers focus on learning, not on their particular positions or issues of personal power; they seek authentic learning in authentic communities. Horn and Jenlink note, “As scholar-practitioners engage in scholarly inquiry into their use and production of knowledge, boundaries are blurred between theory and practice that result in a more relevant and authentic outcome” (as cited in Mullen, 2003, p. 24). Darling-Hammond (1998) also emphasizes the necessity of blurring the theory and practice boundaries in discussing how teachers learn: “This kind of learning cannot occur in college classrooms divorced from practice or in school classrooms divorced from knowledge about how to interpret practice” (p. 8).

Methodological Tools

The methods that seemed to best fit us as scholar-practitioners were dialogue and reflexivity. Dialogue provided the opportunity for both individual introspection and reflection and mutual retrospective analysis of our thoughts as scholar-practitioners. Reflexivity, a powerful method in qualitative research, integrated with our dialogical forays, helped provide significant insights. The transformative potential of dialogue and reflexivity became evident to us as we donned the mantle of the scholar-practitioner. Dialogue is integral to the scholar-practitioner model and to the translation of theory into practice (Moss, 2004).

Dialogue, as an academic concept, draws on a wide range of philosophical and academic traditions (Roberts, 2002). Freire (1970, 1993) speaks to the necessity of dialogue and the concomitant communication, “Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no authentic education” (pp. 92–93). Dewey (1916) also reminds us of the value of communication: “Communication is a process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession. It modifies the disposition of both the parties who partake in it” (p. 11). Roberts (2002) notes the transformative power of dialogue:

The dialogical process challenges people to truly listen and understand one another. Mutual understanding in turn enables them to alter their taken-for-granted assumptions of one another, of the world and their position in it. As they open up to one another and learn from one another, they have the potential to become co-creators of new meaning and new social reality (pp. 6-7).

Embedded in dialogue is the value of relationships (Buber, 1970; Burbules, 1993; Roberts, 2002; Sergiovanni, 1994). Roberts (2002) reminds us, “If a dialogue achieves its

purpose, then a deeper connection and shared identity among the participants emerges and informs their relationship” (p. 8). Burbules (1993) also addresses the effects of dialogue on relationships, “The creation and maintenance of a dialogical relation with others involve forming emotional bonds, such as respect, trust, and concern...” (p. xii). Freire (1970, 1993) adds that, “Dialogue cannot exist...in the absence of a profound love for the world and for the people” (p. 89).

Finally, the value of dialogue rests in its power to lead beyond the expected, to come alive and continue without end, as Burbules (1993) describes:

...one of the reasons for engaging in dialogue rather than more direct modes of assertion or questioning is precisely because we are willing to be carried away from, or beyond, our initial purposes....What this suggests is that there is something about a living dialogue...that is never finished... (p. xiii).

Reflexivity is an integral part of dialogue and the scholar-practitioner frame. Anderson (2002) identifies reflexivity as a necessary component of the scholar-practitioner transformative model. Without “an explicitly reflexive component built into practitioner research, pressures to maintain and defend the status quo may discourage the problematization of current policies and practices” (p. 32).

In exploring the creation of student-centered, authentic professional learning communities in urban schools and in studying the literature relevant to these issues, we have spent many hours in scholar-practitioner dialogue. One author, identified in the dialogue as Ingrid, is a former elementary school teacher and language arts facilitator in a large, urban district, and works closely with teachers and students. She is planning to pursue a principalship in the future and is now serving as an administrative intern. While she is a “practitioner,” she is also a “scholar” in that a year ago, she completed her educational leadership studies (including as a student in the second author’s classes) and a master’s degree in the field. She reads research and engages in scholarly conversations with colleagues. She has also recently served as co-editor of a book on literacy (author, 2005).

The other author, identified as Stella, is currently an assistant professor in educational leadership. She is in the process of redefining her identity, including within the scholar-practitioner leadership model and within the frame of her current role. She has, however, intimate familiarity with the practitioner’s world, having served for 30 years as a superintendent, assistant superintendent, principal, assistant principal, and secondary teacher in a number of urban districts. In addition, she grew up as an immigrant in an urban community — Gary, Indiana. In her leadership positions she had a commitment to scholarly work and to transformational leadership, inviting nationally renowned educational leaders, such as Thomas J. Sergiovanni, to address staff and parents. She also

Scholar-Practitioner Dialogue: Authentic Community

included students in school improvement and leadership dialogue. Now, while immersed in scholarly work, as a teacher she sees the clear connection between that scholarly work and practice and the power of that connection when carried out in a collegial, collaborative partnership.

We set aside the traditional definitions of our roles as we worked together as scholar-practitioners to structure and carry out our project. We had a total of 10 face-to-face meetings as well as e-mail communications and telephone conversations. Each meeting was four to five hours in length. Four planning meetings were held between October 2006 and January 2007 to discuss writing a scholar-practitioner paper together, to identify our subject of student-centered, authentic professional learning communities in urban schools, and to begin the planning of our study. Subsequently, we had four meetings during which we dialogued about student-centered schools, authentic professional learning communities, and urban schools. We taped and transcribed our dialogues, permitting subsequent careful analysis and reflection, and thus, protected one aspect of the trustworthiness of the data. In addition to our meetings, the writing process was continued by e-mailing drafts and suggestions to each other. Finally, two meetings were held to clarify our thoughts and refine the manuscript. Most of the meetings were held at the university where taping equipment was available, parking was convenient, and we had access to the university library when needed. The four meetings during which we taped our dialogue were divided into two segments. The first part was at the university and consisted of the taping of our dialogue. The second part consisted of informal dialogue away from the professional setting. Continuing the dialogue informally gave us greater insights into each other's thinking and also developed our relationship with a further blurring of our roles.

As we worked together on this project, we were no longer teacher and student, scholar and practitioner, P-12 educator and university professor. Instead we became scholar-practitioners engaged in exploring topics about which we were both passionate. Following these four meetings, we each transcribed segments of the tapes. We then analyzed the transcripts separately and together, coded our dialogues, and identified critical areas. We selected representative excerpts from the dialogues and include them here, along with our reflections on them.

In our study, we exemplify the blending of the scholar and practitioner roles and the melding of theory and practice, which also are requisite in creating student-centered, authentic professional learning communities. We recognize that "practitioners" are faced with and sometimes overwhelmed by the challenges and pressure applied by policy makers today through the narrow accountability goals, particularly those represented by *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB)¹ and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)². At the same time, as "scholars," we understand the necessity that educators promote reflective education

and consistent inquiry within a school community advocating for children in an urban setting. In our dialogues, bringing these roles together as scholar-practitioners, we explore three themes: 1) student-centered schools, 2) authentic professional learning communities, and 3) urban schools. At the same time we begin to establish our own authentic professional learning community, the very roots of which we are exploring. We introduce a segment of our dialogue on each theme, followed by our analysis and contextualizing discussion.

Scholar-Practitioner Dialogue 1: Student-Centered Schools

Stella: What does a student-centered culture mean to each of us?

Ingrid: To me, it means focusing our energies on what's in the best interest of students — using their life experiences to tap into helping them learn and making learning relevant to their lives.

Stella: Okay. The first thing that comes to mind for me is that everyone in the school is an advocate for students. Whether they teach elementary or high school, they are teaching kids — different ages, but still kids.

Ingrid: When you say that, the first thing that comes to my mind, even though we're talking about student-centeredness, is community. We have to be cognizant of the way we interact with kids, conscious of our own learning style in order to avoid inflicting our style on our students. That's part of what community, as well as student-centeredness, is to me — growing kids from where they are.

Stella: I think we also need the students' voices in the process. It never ceases to amaze me how we miss the obvious. We miss the fact that we should include students in some of our questioning, explorations, and frustrations. In trying to find a way to resolve or improve issues related to kids, the only thing we don't do is ask the students. That is such a mistake.

Ingrid: Some of the most effective practices in education right now have to do with including students in the process. It doesn't mean just the curriculum, like you said before. It means everything. A perfect example is school rules — I can come up with the same rules with a different set of kids every year by including them in the process. They know and can articulate what needs to be done.

Stella: I can think of an example of inviting student voice. As part of the process of developing a school improvement process as a superintendent, I planned to meet with

Scholar-Practitioner Dialogue: Authentic Community

high school and middle school kids. However, I then decided to include first grade through high school, and it was fascinating to listen to first graders explaining what they wanted in school. It was truly enlightening. Afterward I thought, “Now that was so obvious, how can we miss those voices?” But yet, even high school students are rarely asked to participate in such activities.

Ingrid: I think that sometimes that may come down to feeling like there is a loss of power when in fact there is not. We are empowering students, which by default will edify us.

Stella: Absolutely.

Ingrid: But it is a relinquishing of fear that needs to drive that.

Stella: Well, and it’s also the traditional roles and the traditional model.

Ingrid: ...that we grew up with; that very much is in the back of our heads. Absolutely. That fear of risk-taking. Being called out. Being wrong.

Stella: It’s interesting that you said that, because in addition, when we ask the question, we then have a responsibility to do something with the answer. That means we might have to change things. And people sometimes are afraid.

Ingrid: That is exactly right. I had not even thought of that. It totally puts the onus on us to actually complete the cycle. It’s like a circle of our learning and their learning. And it just keeps going and going. It’s frightening to enter that cycle because you don’t know the outcome. For most, this is uncharted territory which, minimally, creates discomfort.

Stella: I like that. One thing that is distinctive about the student-centered culture and the authentic professional learning community is that educators are willing to listen to the students. They have much to tell us, and we have a responsibility and an opportunity to listen. However, I also think that the educators — the teachers and the principals — always have the primary responsibility for creating educational opportunities for the students. Although students are part of that whole community and every aspect of it, at the same time, that community exists for students and must always advocate for them.

Ingrid: Yes. That makes sense. It kind of reminds me of a scenario that was painted for me when I was studying for my master’s. A colleague was in a meeting with administrators and asked the question, “When are we going to talk about students and their achievement?” Because it seemed to be all about the adults....

Reflection 1: Student-Centered Schools

As our dialogue shows, we see an authentic, professional learning community arising from a student-centered school community. Student-centered education is a given in the vision of successful schools. Thus, the student-centered school that Dewey (1916) first championed 100 years ago has again become the focal point in this era of assessment. Education has been redefined to focus on student learning or performance, rather than on teacher performance. However, this transformation sometimes is evidenced in expectations more than in practice. Many experienced teachers still struggle to revise their lessons, which often include a heavy lecture component, to reflect this new pedagogy.

With the expectation for student-performance-based learning, it is now necessary that the teachers modify their own performance, limit their center-stage lecturing, and instead engage the student in active learning and collaborative activities. No longer is the old lens accepted of the teacher's responsibility ending with such statements as, "Well, I taught the material," even when the students did not learn. Although good teachers have always been concerned about individual student learning, that disposition is now a universal expectation. Effective educators have moved to student-centered schools both in developing the curriculum and in providing the necessary support for students to be successful, i.e., creating a learning culture and community. The next step is to educate policy makers to acknowledge that this support is imperative and must accompany mandates, particularly in urban schools.

Accompanying this paradigm shift to the student-centered school is the advent of the professional learning community. If the teachers must define their work by the success of their students, then the teachers must also focus on being learners themselves, pursuing a deeper understanding of learning and seeking effective pedagogy and teaching strategies to engage their students.

These concepts — student-centered schools and authentic professional learning communities in urban schools — offer hope and the potential for transformation for the future. Some schools have indeed made progress in implementing such communities; others have dutifully adopted the terms of reform but remain disappointingly far from the professed vision. Educators today often feel "ham strung" by the singular focus of policy makers on narrowly defined accountability exemplified by NCLB and often feel powerless to use their best judgment to impact student achievement while improving school environments.³ Thus, "student-ready teachers...need to be curious about students, their lives, their homes, and their ideas" (Burke & Burke, 2005, p. 282). By determining what students bring to the school, teachers can understand what the students know and in what they are interested. Armed with that insight, teachers can best promote learning by sharing responsibility of the learning process with the students. A wish often expressed by teachers is to have students in their classes take responsibility for their learning. Burke and

Scholar-Practitioner Dialogue: Authentic Community

Burke state, “By taking an active interest in who students are and what they bring to the learning community, teachers may help students develop their own voice and ownership in the learning process” (p. 282). Freire (2004) criticizes schools that are not student-centered in their curricular decisions and do not give students voice, “Worse yet, it turns them [students] into ‘containers,’ into ‘receptacles’ to be ‘filled’ by the teacher” (p. 72).

Given today’s obsession with standards alone and assessment based on a single test to determine success as defined by the federal mandates of NCLB, the student-centered school will address the mandates while resisting being limited by them. The learning needs and the progress made by each child cannot be ignored in a student-centered school that strives to be an authentic professional learning community. However, NCLB neither acknowledges the importance of, nor promotes authentic learning communities in schools. Not surprisingly then, and despite its euphemistic and progressive-sounding name, NCLB contradicts itself, having caused educators to leave many children behind in terms of authentic learning, as well as emotional and psychological support, in order to satisfy the law’s demands. Even strong educators are forced by the pressure of federal mandates to focus on the students who are close to passing and to allocate fewer resources to children who have little or no hope of passing the test and the gifted, who are already passing the tests.

Our dialogue identifies student advocacy as a prime responsibility of educators. Advocacy includes promoting learning, providing the necessary support and more, and listening to student voice. Our dialogue, too, easily leads us to reflection about student voice, both its importance and the reason it is sometimes excluded by educators. The primary reason for the latter, we conclude, is fear of change and loss of power. Once one commits to listening to students, there is an inherent commitment to change. And change inspires fear, the fear of losing the familiar, traditional power of formal roles.

Scholar-Practitioner Dialogue 2: Authentic Professional Learning Communities

Ingrid: An authentic professional learning community means...everyone is collegial. No one loses his/her hierarchical authority, but ultimately everybody’s concern is about students’ achievement and sharing knowledge rather than hoarding it. I think there’s a lot to the way we should talk in a professional learning community, a collegial conversation. We can disagree. But there again, we have to get some norms about how we’re going to communicate in our community in order for it to be the most successful. Without some of that in place, I think professional learning communities are going to be in name only, kind of like we’ve read and seen experientially. We talk about it; we use the words; but we don’t know how to talk to each other in order to really, truly get at the deeper meaning of what a learning community is about.

Stella: I think part of the problem that we struggle with in creating authentic professional learning communities is the absence of a genuine commitment. Without that, educators fall into the trap of lacking either the personal or community commitment, while still using the words of professional learning communities. The words may sound good, but they are empty and superfluous. In other words, we do what is popular. We use the verbiage. We even do book studies. We do all the surface “stuff,” but we never delve into the deeper issues.

Ingrid: We go through the motions because we know we’re supposed to.

Stella: Why do you think we know we’re supposed to?

Ingrid: Because every conference we attend, every journal we pick up talks about professional learning communities.

Stella: If the leaders believe that professional learning communities are a panacea, the most recent, perfect, and quick solution in reforming our schools, then the teachers are going to feel that they are obligated to implement such a community. Our efforts remain at the level of instantaneous perfection,⁴ the quick fix. Authentic professional learning communities are not about easy or immediate. I think that is where we miss a powerful opportunity for improvement.

Ingrid: Dufour talks specifically about discord. The discord has to be worked through to get to the next level. Not everyone will agree. Ultimately when it comes down to looking at student work, which a learning community needs to do, what we do with that information and how we circulate it back into our classroom via instruction will likely be different than our colleagues. That can be cause for some discord.

Stella: Absolutely. What do you think is going to be necessary in order to have an authentic professional learning community? What are the components — as opposed to a superficial, in-name-only community that we’ve discussed?

Ingrid: We need to have a common vision. Everybody’s got to be on the same page. We need to have some kind of democratic language that we use with one another to honor each other. Some protocols need to be in place in order to look at student work in a meaningful way in order to drive our instruction more effectively. It doesn’t have to be exactly the same, but certainly it will help us gain the best that each of us has to bring to the community. So I think the vision, the language with which we operate, and the way we look at student work will drive our instruction.

Stella: I would agree on the critical role of having a vision. As a leader, if you have no direction, if you can’t see the bigger and more hopeful future, then toward what are you

Scholar-Practitioner Dialogue: Authentic Community

going to be leading? But in looking at vision, I also don't think that there can be a leader who doesn't have courage. It is absolutely a necessary component. The way I have defined courage is wisdom, passion, and hope. All those components are critical. The wise leader is going to gather all the necessary information — won't "shoot from the hip," will decide when the right time is to move toward attaining the vision, and will identify the priorities. Passion is also critical in courageous leadership. No matter what the hurdles are, courageous leaders are still going to use their creativity, resources, and energy to find another path because of that passion. The third component is hope. You have to be hopeful that, in fact, you can attain the vision. It may not be tomorrow; it may not be next year; but progress will be made. Particularly with today's criticisms of public education, the leader must communicate hope to the staff. If the leader becomes pessimistic, cynical, or hopeless, there is nothing then that he or she has to give to colleagues and staff. Without courage, educational leaders will be limited by politics, fear, cynicism, and perhaps even self-interest.

Ingrid: I agree 100 percent — knowing that we have an unrealistic amount of time to meet equally unattainable demands under NCLB. Not even corporate America can accomplish what is being expected of urban public schools. Therefore, we have to maintain our advocacy of students regardless of where the test scores need to be — like you said, "both/and." We're only going to raise students' achievement so far before the "rug is pulled out from underneath us." So what is our goal going to be at the end of the day? In 2014, when we look in the mirror, can we say we educated kids? Or will we say, "Well, we kept from failing for a couple more years than we would have otherwise." I want to say that we have educated kids to the best of our ability and to the upper edge of their capability. And anything less is unacceptable.

Stella: Absolutely. An additional component of authentic, professional learning communities is a culture of mutual reflection, as well as one of individual reflection. We each have to reflect on what we're doing as teachers or educational leaders, but then the whole school community has to be able to come together. This gets back to the norms you mentioned. We need to reflect upon, "How are we educating kids? What is important? And how well are we doing it?"

Ingrid: Exactly. I think that's where the common assessments and the "How is that going to drive our instruction?" all comes in during collaboration. I think that's where I see a disconnect sometimes. Because the vision is clearly there, but the understanding of how to attain it sometimes isn't. The ability to mutually reflect without being judgmental can prevent the blurring of the lens through which we are looking, too.

Stella: That's one of the things that educational leaders need to think about. You mentioned earlier, in talking about the hierarchy, that you don't really lose that. And you don't, but I

think it's important for educational leaders to remember not that *they* are focused on that hierarchy but that their staff probably is. They see principals in that position of authority, so I think principals then have to figure out ways to address communication.

Ingrid: And that's where an educational leader needs to be vocal about the kind of language that we will use with one another despite the existing hierarchy. I think if an administrator is really earnest it comes across right away.

Reflection 2: Authentic Professional Learning Communities

One has to reflect on the evolution of the professional learning community in order to understand why and how it is currently being embraced by educators. It faces significant hurdles if it is to be an authentic and valuable learning community, rather than one more superficial, in-name-only quick fix or a desire for instantaneous perfection.

The culture of schools and the dispositions of educators, as reflected in their language, have already been negatively influenced by NCLB. Many teachers in graduate educational leadership courses have begun to respond robotically in discussions about school improvement and the definition of education. They mention only test scores, the collection of data, the disaggregation of this data, and other limited topics driven by federal mandates. Although test scores and data are important, it is nothing less than frightening that current teachers and future educational leaders are defining their vision of education in such narrow terms. Armstrong speaks to such harm perpetrated by NCLB:

The most destructive legacy of NCLB may turn out to be that it hijacks the dialogue in education away from talking about the education of human beings... "Human Development Discourse" and toward a focus on tests, standards, and accountability... "Academic Achievement Discourse" (p. 8).

In the last 30 years of attempting to implement effective school reform, educational leaders have made clumsy attempts that have fallen short of creating community. Two of these initiatives were site-based management and empowering teachers through bottom-up school reform. After years of wrestling to make these strategies the school improvement panaceas, educators found that these efforts had failed as major reforms. Site-based management has resulted in no improvement in student achievement, contrary to the original expectation. Bottom-up school reform has worked in some instances, but has not resulted in significant school improvement.

These failures, or at least absences of success, are not as perplexing as they may seem at first glance. Site-based management worked in some instances since including teachers in decisions makes sense. Allowing schools to make decisions that affect them and reflect the intimate knowledge of the school these educators possess is logical. However, sharing

Scholar-Practitioner Dialogue: Authentic Community

decisions has value when not insisted upon in every situation. For example, teachers protested, and with justification, that they did not want to participate in all decisions, such as deciding which light bulbs to purchase. Thus, site-based management was an example of "...the limitations of single-minded approaches to practice" (Jenlink, 2005, p. 5). Bottom-up reform also has its limitations. It sometimes artificially silences dialogue by discouraging the voices of educational leaders in deference to teacher voices alone. We absolutely need the voices of teachers, but we also need the voices of principals and superintendents. In other words, we need the whole community, a community with every member being of value and having voice. Both of these examples of school improvement strategies include the concept of empowerment, which is important. They remain, however, surface-level school reforms because they insist on singular solutions, perceived as magic bullets, and stop short of creating authentic learning communities.

Communicating and creating a vision that is shared by all and is fluid is necessary and promises the hope of meaningful change. Yet establishing such a common vision is no easy task. At the elementary level, it is often easier to build cohesion and even cooperation, but try to convince almost any high school staff that they must be responsible for a common vision, and there is likely to be resistance and sometimes rebellion. Individualism and its twin, competition, are promoted in our schools both for students and for teachers, yet both are detrimental, especially in trying to establish community (Kohn, 1986). Individualism must be minimized and the vision of community promoted if there is to be school improvement. Proficient in *educationese*, educators are also effective in using the right words without changing their beliefs and values. Sergiovanni (1994) warns us, "Authentic community requires us to do more than pepper our language with the word 'community,' label ourselves as a community in our mission statement, and organize teachers into teams and schools into families" (p. xiii).

The new paradigm of authentic professional learning communities requires thinking more broadly than the old one permitted. Senge (1996) terms this broader thinking as "systems thinking." Historically, educators have thought more narrowly (Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004). Teachers have focused on the world within their classroom walls and have found it difficult to deal with issues that affected the whole school or district. The isolation of teachers, which is part of the traditional model of the school, promotes this limited view. Teachers have closed their doors and worked with their students in an environment essentially apart from colleagues. Since communication with other educators has been limited, teachers struggle to focus on the broader issues of the system outside their classrooms.

The paradigm shift to the student-centered, authentic professional learning community must be accompanied by collegial trust and support. Although individual reflection and commitment to consistent learning are important, the school community

must also have mutual retrospection and reflection. Such a culture focused on inquiry, however, is a necessary, although not sufficient, component of an authentic, professional learning community. A devoted, courageous leader is equally necessary if a professional learning community is to be effective. Leaders cannot lead their schools to a vision that they themselves do not possess. Concurrently, visionary leaders can accomplish some significant change, but will be unable to sustain that change without a community of educators infused with similar dispositions.

An additional process that threatens professional learning communities, is that of the deskilling of all educators. Kanpol (1992) defines that term: “The concept of deskilling has to do with teachers executing someone else’s goals and plans...they are not the conceivers of plans over their work, that is, they do not determine curricular goals or establish content” (p. 14). Educational leaders are similarly at risk of deskilling since prescription, rather than judgment has become the order of the day.

Scholar-Practitioner Dialogue 3: Urban Schools

Ingrid: What are the major challenges faced by urban schools? Five things come to mind: 1) cultural diversity, 2) teachers’ and students’ difficulty in seeing through others’ eyes, 3) serving students from both ends of the economic spectrum, 4) attracting quality teachers, and 5) the number of students we serve.

Stella: From my perspective, the major challenge is poverty, and that has been proven to have a tremendous impact on children’s learning. The second is urban children’s lack of social capital. It is something that we have to recognize in order to provide the necessary support. It goes beyond textbooks and formal curriculum. I agree with you that diversity is a strong challenge. I also think that the impact of poverty, social capital, and diversity is exacerbated by hegemony. We tend to teach the values of the dominant culture, but we don’t always recognize that we’re doing so. Finally, most kids can’t escape the urban world and the world of poverty because they have no vision of other possibilities. That is what education and professional learning communities can teach them and help them to attain.

Ingrid: As we look at the challenges that urban schools face, which ones are related to the student-centered, authentic professional learning community we want to create? That goes right back to the social capital. If you can recognize what a student does bring to the table — regardless of whether it matches what you bring to the table — you’re still learning. We’ll learn from them...I think if we...don’t recognize their backgrounds and how their behavior will be dictated on the street vs. in the classroom, they won’t listen, and they won’t learn from us. We need to be able to validate who they are and where they come from. That is the big missing link in my experience. I think the kids sense that we

Scholar-Practitioner Dialogue: Authentic Community

truly understand, or at least have an empathy...so they know we are there with them and on their side. As far as the student-centered part, we must be culturally proficient, or at least, evolving on that continuum.

Stella: I totally agree on the critical importance of caring and empathy. An educator must have that....Urban children also need support if they are to escape lives of poverty. There is an assumption in NCLB that everybody can “pull himself/herself up by his/her bootstraps.” There will be exceptions, but the majority of kids will fail if we do not provide the necessary support. Your comments reminded me of the scholar-practitioner model and embedded in that is the willingness and commitment of teachers to learn. As educators we have to let go of “I already know this.” Perhaps, but there are other things to learn — and that is what you are getting at, too — how does one touch the lives of individual children in the class? Just talking together about the scholar-practitioner model showed us its power. Yes, maybe one is letting go of some things, but I guess I don’t see it as a letting go because one is gaining so much more.

Ingrid: In my experience, the teachers who have the most difficulty in letting go have been teachers with some control issues. They feel that letting go means letting go of their authority, which it does not. They have to have the faith, hope, as well as high expectations. I liken it to Christianity. An authentic Christian, who has truly “let go” will understand the same concept of having to do that as a teacher. It becomes less about who you are — it’s letting go of your ego.

Stella: I think so. Individuals who would have a difficult time letting go are usually insecure. If you are secure enough in what you’re doing, it’s a non-issue. If you’re insecure, then you have to hide behind the power of your role.

Reflection 3: Urban Schools

Urban schools face the challenge of effectively working with diversity, multiculturalism, and poverty and are at greatest risk today to be limited to technocratic, prescriptive goals in the fearful attempts to reach AYP. They are, therefore, least likely to have the opportunity to establish an authentic professional learning community. There is a chasm between educational policy and urban student learning. Yeo’s research on urban schools led to the “realization that the educational practices and cultural capital promulgated by the school staff, texts, and official policies were inconsistent with the knowledge, culture, and experience of these [urban] children and their community” (p. 104). Yeo (1997) speaks, too, to the limited curriculum in urban schools and the reaction of urban students and parents. A vicious circle is created when erroneous assumptions are made that children in urban schools, who don’t do well on standardized tests, are incapable of higher-order thinking skills. Nelson, Palonsky, & McCarthy (2007) note that the

“negative impact of standards reform has fallen hardest on poor and minority students” (p. 142). Kozol (2005) points to the low expectations in many traditional, urban schools reflected in a conversation with a student in a Los Angeles school:

Mireya...suddenly began to cry. “I don’t want to take hairdressing. I did not need sewing either. I knew how to sew. My mother is a seamstress in a factory. I’m trying to go to college. I don’t need to sew to go to college. My mother sews. I hoped for something else” (pp. 179–180).

The student-centered school will not only be aware of the differences children bring to the schoolhouse but will also respect that diversity. Too often there is an effort — conscious or unconscious — to promote hegemony by seeking to dismiss students’ cultural differences and force them into the mold of the dominant culture. Burke and Burke (2005) find that children need to know that “their experiences and ideas are uniquely valuable” (p. 282). Nelson et al. (2007) bluntly point out that “Children who come to school hungry and poor are not likely to be helped by more rigorous standards” (p. 141). They conclude that “The standards movement can be thought of as a new kind of discrimination. Under the guise of fairness...students from less wealthy homes with less well-educated parents are denied the education they need” (pp. 141-142). Cochran-Smith (2005) concurs with a “flat-out rejection of NCLB’s flawed assumptions about how to attain that goal [of equal and high-quality education for all students]” (p. 103). Clearly, while student-centered schools and authentic professional learning communities are necessary in all schools, they are most critical in urban schools if we are to avoid further marginalizing the neediest children.

Gardiner and Enomoto (2004) aptly conclude in discussing leadership and community that “Multicultural leadership gets to the heart of an ethic of care in schooling by recognizing and valuing the important contributions of all who create the school and community” (p. 40). Kanpol (1997) links empathy to multiculturalism: “Identity and multiculturalism is bound within the desire to empathize with the ‘other’ (those who are marginalized) as an ongoing relationship of mutual recognition and trust” (p. 55). Furthermore, he finds one cannot discuss urban schools without including critical pedagogy since it addresses the issues of hegemony and social justice, subjects imperative to an understanding of urban schools.

Final Reflections

Our next project will continue the use of the dialogical methodology in the scholar-practitioner stance. With the inclusion of additional voices, we anticipate deeper insights in effecting school reform through the use of authentic professional learning communities focused on urban students. What we learned in this study was enlightening;

Scholar-Practitioner Dialogue: Authentic Community

we experienced the power and depth of reflexive dialogue for individual educators and for educational reform.

There is a common, unifying thread of learning in all of our dialogue. Student-centered schools focus on student learning, including the support students need in order to learn. Authentic professional learning communities focus on creating a culture that supports consistent learning of all individuals in the school community — students, teachers, support staff, parents, and educational leaders. Urban schools have a spotlighted role in increasing the learning of children, especially the many who come to school with the greatest needs and the fewest opportunities outside of the school environment. Finally, the key goal of the scholar-practitioner model and reflexive dialogue is also learning. Scholar-practitioners and those engaged in authentic dialogue seek to learn from each other, as we have been doing in this project. In addressing the subject of this paper through our scholar-practitioner frame and reflexive dialogue, even deeper learning resulted than we had anticipated. Through our personal experience we felt the impact of reflexive dialogue and gained growing insights into the scholar-practitioner model, as well as how to nurture the authentic learning community that we were trying to create with one another.

Sergiovanni (1994), who espoused the concept of school community long before it became widely popular, aptly comments on the cause of superficial efforts to attain it, “A good idea becomes a fad when it is adopted and used at the level of practice without a change at the level of theory” (1994, p. xii). Therein lies the merit of the scholar-practitioner frame, which melds theory and practice. As scholar-practitioners, we have attempted to demonstrate this in our study by overcoming the separateness of our daily work roles through the use of reflection and dialogue. The words of Freire (2004) reflect our thinking and experience: “Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers” (p. 80). His words apply to the relationship of educational leaders and teachers, teachers and students in any classroom, and the collaboration of P–12 educators and those at the university level.

The scholar-practitioner model can effectively contribute to the resolution of some of the issues in education today: an understanding of the complexity of education, a resistance to policy makers’ attacks on education, the creation of a support system for urban children, and a focus on student and teacher learning in authentic professional learning communities. In our project the merits of the scholar-practitioner model and reflexive dialogue rest in their potential for enabling a vision of student-centered, authentic professional learning communities in urban schools. Embedded in the scholar-practitioner frame are powerful hope and transformative potential for individual educators and for educational reform. Thus, the scholar-practitioner model transforms us so we can transform schools.

Notes

¹*No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) was signed into law in 2002, reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (EASA) of 1965. NCLB mandates that 100 percent of students will achieve proficiency in reading and math by 2014.

²Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is a mandate of NCLB. Schools that do not make AYP, as defined by each of the states, face punitive measures. Subgroups, e.g., special education, English as a Second Language, minority groups, that have a minimum number of students set by each state will affect AYP. It is not unusual for a school to fail to make AYP although significant improvement may have been made and achievement may be at high levels if the school fails to show improvement in the achievement of a subgroup.

³We support accountability, but not that which defines education as a single-test accountability. The latter substitutes minimums for all educational goals and fails to acknowledge the complexity of children, education, and the social factors that affect both.

⁴“Instantaneous perfection,” a term often used in religious writings and occasionally in other disciplines, is used by Stella, one of the authors, in relation to education. It is the insistence on the perfect and immediate and represents society’s demand for quick fixes and panaceas. It is more extensively discussed in a previous work (Batagiannis, in press, 2007).

References

- Anderson, G. L. & Herr, K. (1999). The new paradigm wars: Is there room for rigorous practitioner knowledge in schools and universities? *Educational Researcher*, 28(5), 12-21+40.
- Anderson, G. L. & Saavedra, E. (Fall 2002). School-based reform, leadership, and practitioner research: Mapping the terrain. *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly: A Journal for the Scholar-Practitioner Leader*, 1(1), 23-38.
- Armstrong, T. (2006). *The best schools: How human development research should inform educational practice*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- Batagiannis, S. C. (in press, 2007). Leadership guided by courage: A challenge to instantaneous perfection. *Journal of Educational Thought*, 41(2).
- Buber, M. (1970). *I and thou*. (W. Kaufmann, Trans.) New York: Charles Scribner’s. (Original work published 1923).
- Burbules, N. C. (1993). *Dialogue in teaching: Theory and practice*. New York: Teachers College.
- Burke, C. & Burke, W. (2005). Student-ready schools. *Childhood Education*, 81(5), 281-285.
- Cochran-Smith, M. (2005). No Child Left Behind: 3 years and counting. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 56(2), 99-103.
- Cochran-Smith, M. & Lytle, S. L. (1999). Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teacher learning in communities. In A. Iran-Nejad & P. D. Pearson (Eds.), *Review of research in education*, 24 (pp. 249-305). Washington, D.C.: American Educational Research Association.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (February 1998). Teacher learning that supports student learning. *Educational Leadership*, 55(5), 6-11.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: Macmillan.

Scholar-Practitioner Dialogue: Authentic Community

- DuFour, R., DuFour, R., Eaker, R., & Karhanek, G. (2004). *Whatever it takes: How professional learning communities respond when kids don't learn*. Bloomington, IN: National Educational Service.
- Freire, P. (2004). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Gardiner, M. & Enomoto, E. K. (2004). Administrator preparation for multicultural leadership: Inside four nationally accredited programs. *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly: A Journal for the Scholar-Practitioner Leader*, 2(3), 25-43.
- Horn, R. A. (2002). Differing perspectives on the magic of dialogue: Implications for a scholar-practitioner leader. *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly: A Journal for the Scholar-Practitioner Leader*, 1(2), 83-102.
- Horn, R. A. (2003). Editorial — *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly: A Journal for the Scholar-Practitioner Leader*, 1(3), 3-4.
- Jenlink, P. M. (2003). Editorial — Identity and culture work: The scholar-practitioner as public intellectual. *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly: A Journal for the Scholar-Practitioner Leader*, 1(4), 3-8.
- Jenlink, P. M. (2003-2004). Editorial — A scholar-practitioner stance: practice of social justice and democracy. *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly: A Journal for the Scholar-Practitioner Leader*, 2(2), 3-12.
- Jenlink, P. M. (2004). Editorial — Ensuring democracy in an era of standards and accountability: The scholar-practitioner's work. *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly: A Journal for the Scholar-Practitioner Leader*, 2(4), 3-12.
- Jenlink, P. M. (2005). Editorial — On bricolage and the intellectual work of the scholar-practitioner. *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly: A Journal for the Scholar-Practitioner Leader*, 3(1), 3-12.
- Jenlink, P. M. & Horn, R. A. (2002). Editorial: Introducing the *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly*. *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly: A Journal for the Scholar-Practitioner Leader*, 1(1), 3-6.
- Kanpol, B. (1992). *Towards a theory and practice of teacher cultural politics: Continuing the postmodern debate*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Kanpol, B. (1997). *Issues and trends in critical pedagogy*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.
- Kohn, A. (1986, 1992). *No contest: The case against competition*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Kozol, J. (2005) *The shame of the nation: The restoration of apartheid in schooling in America*. New York: Crown.
- Margolin, I. & Ezer, H. (2003). The emergence of a teacher educators' learning community: Open and hidden discourse. *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly: A Journal for the Scholar-Practitioner Leader*, 2(1), 61-77.
- Moss, G. (2004). A narrative analysis of scholar-practitioner teacher leadership preparation. *Journal of School Leadership*, 14(2), 171-194.
- Mullen, C. A. (2003). What is a scholar-practitioner? K-12 teachers and administrators respond. *Scholar-Practitioner Quarterly: A Journal for the Scholar-Practitioner Leader* 1(4), 9-26.
- Nelson, J. L., Palonsky, S. B., & McCarthy, M. R. (2007). *Critical issues in education: Dialogues and dialectics*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Senge, P. M. (1996). Leading learning organizations: The bold, the powerful, and the invisible. In F. Hesselbein, M. Goldsmith, & R. Beckhard (Eds.), *The leader of the future* (pp. 41-58). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Sergiovanni, T. (1994). *Building community in schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Sergiovanni, T. (1996). *Leadership for the schoolhouse*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Sergiovanni, T. (2005). *Strengthening the heartbeat: Leading and learning together in schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Roberts, N. C. (2002). Calls for dialogue. In N. C. Roberts (Ed.), *The transformative power of dialogue* (pp. 3-24). New York: Elsevier Science.
- Thompson, S. C., Gregg, L., & Niska, J. M. (2004). Professional learning communities, leadership, and student learning. *Research in Middle Level Education Online*, 28 (1), pp. 35-54.
- Yeo, F. L. (1997). *Inner-city schools, multiculturalism, and teacher education: A professional journey*. New York: Garland.
- Yeo, F. L. with commentary by Kanpol, B. (1997). The inner-city school and critical pedagogy: locations of possibility and difference. In B. Kanpol & F. Yeo (Eds.), *Issues and trends in critical pedagogy* (pp. 93-114). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton.